



Church, state and national identity: Some historical and theological reflections from a Catholic perspective

Mario Conti

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The pundits tell us that the Referendum will be decided on financial considerations. That may seem a rather depressing thought on the part of those who are excited by the prospect of an independent Scotland, built upon a strong sense of a Scottish identity, a fought-over freedom, a unique culture and a history, which from its earliest records portrays a country that knew where it was going, and through changing allegiances in self-defence never broke up into the parts from which it was forged many centuries ago after the Romans had left Britain and the tribes that occupied the land beyond their rule found a common cause in being united. What assisted in the forging of Scotland was a common faith – Christianity, Roman Christianity. It had of course its own flavour; it did not need to be inculturated, any more than any other part of the continent needed inculturation. It was the cultivating factor; a faith, expressed in a language and art of the people, civilized the land and its indigenous tribes, albeit that in worship and study the Latin language prevailed, uniting it to neighbouring peoples. In a land without cities the form of ecclesiastical government was not metropolitan but centred in monasteries from which bishops exercised their sacred power in their missionary journeys.

The Dark Ages largely conceal the struggles which were inevitable in the coming to birth of Scotland. The barbarous seasonal invasions of the Norsemen drove the population inland from the coast. Only when these invaders were Christianised in their own land did these invasions cease, and people could return safely to the coasts; our ports became open to foreign trade and coastal towns flourished. These

Norsemen profited greatly from their new faith and with extraordinary energy came conquering in a new mode, injecting a new order and a new architecture, and a Continental style of ecclesiastical governance which helped to bring prosperity to the towns which everywhere sprung up between castle and cathedral.

These developments took place nine centuries ago, and we associate that period with Queen Margaret, wife of Malcolm Canmore. The reforms which she introduced at Court and in the church were largely those which had been taking place on the Continent and associated with the Reform of the Benedictine Order, with St Bernard of Clairvaux and a renewed papacy which reached its climax in terms of its influence on both church and state with Pope Innocent III, Lothario dei Conti (I had to mention that!), at the end of that century. There is extant a letter of St Bernard to David, King of Scots, son of St Margaret (written about 1134) asking his support for the new monastic foundation at Fountains (in present day Yorkshire): 'I have long since learned to love you most illustrious King,' he wrote, 'your fair renown has for long stirred in me the desire to meet you in person'.

Clearly there was nothing wrong for the King of Scots to interest himself in an English, or should we say a 'Norman' foundation south of the border. Of course this sense of Norman belonging North and South of the border (and did not David own lands in England?) had its fatal consequences when with the death of the Maid of Norway, the English king believed he had a right to interfere, as the Scots saw it, in the Royal succession. Edward I wrote to the Pope to tell him why he had decided that Balliol should reign (I have seen the document in the archives of the Vatican). In turn the Scots were to write to the Pope in Avignon to tell him why they would not have an English king rule over them. It was drafted by a Scots Abbot in the Abbey of Arbroath. Subsequent Popes were to recognize repeatedly the independent regality of the Scottish kings. Among the Honours of Scotland is a sceptre, later altered I think, a gift of a Pope, while the great Sword of State was given to James IV by Pope Julius II whose predecessor Alexander VI gave the Bull of Foundation for the University of Aberdeen, the third such foundation erected by Papal authority in Scotland, after St Andrews and Glasgow. (The 600th anniversary of the foundation of St Andrews occurred in 2013).

The sixteenth-century Reformers may have admirably sought to ensure a school in every parish in the land; the teachers were the product of Catholic foundations! Inevitably in this sweep of Scottish history, with its emphasis on the interplay of church and state, we are going to have to face the Reformation itself. But before we do so we can pause to note how significant in cultural terms, in terms of education and, though so far we have not mentioned it, in terms of the care of the elderly and the sick, were the contributions of the church.

However, the church was wealthy, and wherever there are riches the vultures descend. The church exercised significant influence – which is power, and the ambitious lust after it! When Bishop Gavin Dunbar of Aberdeen erected a new ceiling to his cathedral church in the first decades of the sixteenth century he had it embellished with the coats of arms of prelates and princes. It is very notable how the arms of the bishops on the central line of the ceiling descending from Pope Leo X, a de Medici, second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the ruler of Florence, are time and time again the same as are displayed of the nobility of Scotland. The rich and powerful are in the church, and the church is with the nobility. And both lived in castles! Saints are not usually found in castles! St Ignatius of Loyola and St Aloysius Gonzaga are the exceptions! The church was ripe for reform!

The rich had seen how well their peers south of the border had fared in the distribution of church land. It was only a matter of time – just a generation before the same opportunity would arise in Scotland. There was sense in looking south, turning their backs on the Auld Alliance. They did not wait in vain. For the people there was no financial gain, but there was a new cadre of churchmen who wanted to get back to basics and they were, in Scotland, inspired by a Frenchman in Switzerland, the Genevan John Calvin. The Gospel continued to be preached, and baptism performed and the Lord's Supper celebrated, but much was lost of the best of the medieval church – above all, the unity of the church which once had given cohesion to the whole continent of Europe. The pattern illustrated on the ceiling of Aberdeen's cathedral was gone forever. For a hundred years and more religious wars scarred the continent and a peace of sorts was arrived at when soldiers got tired of soldiering and princes in going to war, and accepted the principle *cuius regio eius religio* (the



religion of the prince should determine the religion of his subjects), with a notable exception in France when Henry of Navarre decided that ‘Paris was worth a Mass’ and adopted Catholicism! In clannish Scotland the religion of the clan chief was shared with his clansmen, and Scotland had its own civil strife, the fruits of which are still, albeit to an extenuated extent, with us.

People watched with some anxiety the baptized-Catholic son of Mary Queen of Scots, religiously educated as a Protestant, as he made his way south to take the throne vacated by the last of the Tudors (thank God!). The crafty prince had kept people guessing, though Catholic hopes were against the odds! Ironically however his grandson James ‘turned’ – as we say in Scotland – the other way, and lost both thrones to a Protestant princess, when, unexpectedly his Catholic queen gave birth to a son, on the odds of whom expectations were of a Catholic sovereign. Well, I need hardly rehearse for this audience what followed, since in a sense it is your history, though I have maintained for years that we need, sympathetically, to share one another’s histories if the ecumenical movement is truly to take hold of our country. (Perhaps then we can enjoy Orange bands in the way we love our regimental pipers, and reflect on how elements of war can be turned to instruments of peace!)

What has all this to do with Scottish Independence, and a forthcoming referendum? Well I am asking myself that! Not a thing, if you think history has nothing to teach us! Of course it will never be the same, but change always brings some conflict and division in its wake, and if it brings benefits, it may also bring disbenefits, and losses, and we church people are equally likely to share them. Will, for example, the Church of Scotland’s privileged role, admittedly now more pastorally than politically shaped, be weakened to the disadvantage of faith communities generally, and the voice of the church in the so-called market place, or today’s areopagus, the media, curtailed. While the existence of a state or national church is, I dare to say, ecclesiologically suspect, it has ensured that religion and religious communities have had their acknowledged place within the body politic.

Another example, of course, would be faith schools, and while they appear to be more widely canvassed south of the border, there are

those in our country who, contrary to any evidence, would have them dismantled, to a similar loss, as that just mentioned with regard to churches and faith communities, of the place of religion in education.

These considerations amount, it is true, to special pleading, but tell me of any group in the present debate which is not examining the situation in terms of their own interests. Maybe that is not entirely true, since even the commercial section is ready to argue that the best interests of their customers justify their concerns.

Our concerns are more likely to be disinterested, focusing on the social, cultural and spiritual good of the community at large. A few years ago, through the agency of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, I was involved in a symposium entitled “Transcending Poverties” when each of those categories just mentioned came into focus. A Church of Scotland group centred in Glasgow followed it up with an enquiry on how things were seen and addressed at what we describe as ‘grass-roots level’. Underlying it all are the questions of political power sought by those who believe that unless they have governance, backed by a democratic mandate, the things they consider possible cannot be achieved in respect of their own vision of society. (I am tempted to note at this point policies and legal initiatives which have been introduced without a clear democratic mandate, but I will resist the temptation!)

What can be said, however, is that notionally a sound democratic model of governance can be described, and, certainly from a Catholic Social Teaching perspective, we can argue that, when other essential considerations are taken into account such as viability (in terms of resources), cultural coherence (in terms of the targeted group) and deliverability (in terms of the necessary infrastructure), actual governance should ideally take place at the level where these things can be democratically verified and supported.

What more is needed is a vision, a coherent and engaging set of values and objectives. Don’t let anyone say that the churches (and potentially other faith communities) are foreign to such considerations. Our engagement here is precisely within such parameters of competence and interest. So far I have been offering reflections on the first two parts of the theme of this gathering, namely church and state. There is a third phrase to the title, namely national identity. Let

me share a rather personal reflection with you on the Reformation and its impact, since it was a moment of decisive, and divisive, change in the history of Scotland.

When I became Bishop of Aberdeen (in 1977) I made sure that the Chapter of Canons continued to meet monthly in the cathedral to which it belonged. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council had led to its replacement as the principal body of counsellors of the bishop. However it seemed to me very appropriate that those who were to offer counsel to the bishop should first of all meet in prayer with him in his cathedral church.

So I continued the previous practice, and together we recited Prime, one of the morning offices of the church, and I delivered a letter to them in which I rehearsed the main events within the Diocese since our last meeting, offering them the opportunity of making comment on them. (I continued the practice in a slightly different form by making members of the Chapter of Glasgow Cathedral those whom I had appointed Deans and members of the Council of Priests). By consequence of our meeting on Tuesdays in Aberdeen, we regularly recited the psalm set for the Tuesday Office, Psalm 74:

Why, O God, have you cast us off for ever?
Why blaze with anger at the sheep of your pasture?
Remember your people whom you chose long ago,
the tribe you redeemed to be your own possession,
the mountain of Zion where you made your dwelling.

Turn your steps to those places that are utterly ruined!
The enemy has laid waste the whole of the sanctuary.
Your foes have made uproar in your house of prayer:
they have set up their emblems, their foreign emblems,
high above the entrance to the sanctuary.

Their axes have battered the wood of its doors.
They have struck together with hatchet and pickaxe.
O God they have set your sanctuary on fire:
They have razed and profaned the place where you dwell.

Every time I recited that psalm my mind went back to my home town, Elgin and the county of Moray. I grew up in a house built by my father on a narrow strip of land that extended from the High Street to the town's medieval outskirts. A few hundred yards from the back gate of our garden were the impressive ruins of Elgin Cathedral. I went to school in a building adjacent to a late medieval Franciscan Friary whose ruined church and cloister had some decades previously been beautifully restored by the 3rd Marquess of Bute to serve as a convent for the Sisters of Mercy who taught in the school. Nearby was Maisondieu Road, but no sign remained of the medieval hospital. Blackfriars Road recalled a Dominican Friary on the site of which arose a handsome mansion in the Scottish Baronial style. We sometimes motored to visit what remained of Pluscarden Priory, its church ruined, its monastic buildings set up as a hunting lodge, but then in the possession of the Marquess's family who, as I left for junior seminary at Blairs in Aberdeen, made it over again to monks of the Benedictine Order, and as you know it now flourishes as an Abbey I could go on in this vein, but I have recorded enough to illustrate how such monuments could and did have a deep impression on the impressionable mind of a young boy, the answers to whose questions inevitably 'involved' an explanation of the changes which the Reformation had brought to his home country.

Of course the monument on Lady Hill (Our Lady Hill) to the last Duke of Gordon reminded a local laddie of the powerful family under whose Catholic wings, for much of their post-Reformation sway in the North-East, their tenants found shelter from the ostracism and persecution that pertained elsewhere. I knew not bigotry, but was familiar with an identity which both united and distinguished me and the family within the community. I was growing up in the war years. Soldiers and airmen were a familiar sight, the army at Pinefield and the Fleet Air Arm at Lossiemouth and Kinloss, and we knew what their presence meant in those now far-off '40s days. Britain was at war, and we were part of Great Britain, and under threat. We learnt later how Scotland had become part of Britain, and we took pride in our identity. This part of my reflections is more personal in character, and it was, as I thought about our subject, very relevant. When thinking of church and state we could be, indeed need to be, objective (and I hope I have

been evenhandedly so), but when addressing identity a shift in our narrative invariably occurs.

However a distinction needs to be made. The title of our conference speaks of ‘national identity’. Of course this is not the same as ‘personal identity’, though this latter will generally be assumed to coincide with the former. Does national identity take its title from the geographical country we inhabit, or from a tribal root, or from an identifiable community formed over many years by its history and its culture, or from a political entity which has the essential trappings of government and an international acknowledgement of its independence? When we are required, in moving from one part of the world to another, to declare our nationality, do we simply look at page one of our passport, to say in effect that this is how we are distinguished?

Allow me to tell you of two table conversations which I have had, one over a year ago, and the other very recently, and both in the context of our general theme. The first was in Italy in the company of relatives and friends, the latter attempting to answer the inevitable ‘What is Scotland going to do?’ A former Lord Provost, in merry mood, broke into a rendering of “O Flower of Scotland”, which he sang with some distinction. When he had finished I started to hum the Slaves’ Chorus from *Nabucco*. He looked at me quizzically! I explained that a hundred and fifty years ago the states which made up the Italian peninsula had a vision of unity and one by one they came together by referenda in the capitals of their respective countries (and eventually completed the territorial and political jigsaw puzzle by a token invasion of, to an equally token resistance by, the States of the Church). The movement is referred to as Il Risorgimento and it was virtually bloodless. I myself had been invited to take part in one of the Tuscan Hill towns’ celebrations of the Risorgimento because a relative of mine (through my bisnonna, described by the Sindaco as ‘ultima del ramo dei Leonardi’) had penned lines in support of the movement! After a pregnant pause my political friend started singing “Faith of Our Fathers” – for those who do not know it, a somewhat robust declaration of our Catholic faith ‘living still in spite of dungeon, fire and sword’!

The second conversation was recent, and by chance also in an Italian context, in that we were lunching in Sarti’s(!) I was exploring

this question of identity in view of these reflections, and one of my table companions, a Scottish born and domiciled Scot, much travelled through his business interests, remarked that when he was quizzed in America about his Scottishness, he sensed a greater bond of relationship with his inquisitor if he turned out to be a member of the church than if he had had a Scottish grandmother! Such a remark, made in all genuineness, does raise questions as to what level we dig in determining our own essential identity – irrespective of what our passport states; and should also prompt our politicians to recognize that matters of national identity go deeper than those of financial significance, and that among the deepest are those which relate to faith, to culture, to values and to affection.

It must be on such bases that our future is built, and when you consider them they are essentially relational, and removed from the service of self and the pride of place. I imagine that what we are doing here is exploring some of these bases, while being attentive at the same time to very practical questions which could argue to the need for change and which take into account the effects of change, both positive and negative, which in the nature of any change are likely to arise.